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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the differences between reading and writing is as important as recognizing their similarities for improving current methods of teaching composition. Environment and motivation are two areas in which these differences are most noticeable. Since motivation is a preexisting quality that can only be fostered and not implanted, environment must play the central role in the learning process. Reinforcement, in the form of feedback indicating level of success, is central to motivation, yet this feedback is often missing when children write in school, thus generating important differences in the acquisition of reading and writing skills. Any program to improve developing writers must establish a classroom environment that will stimulate their innate desire to learn. Such an environment must offer a wide range of stimuli in speaking, reading, and listening, as well as writing. The program must also make students aware of the need for written communication and establish realitic goals that will generate success. Immediate feedback can be provided through conferences between teachers and peers and in collaborative writing projects. Although classroom environment plays a pivotal role in writing improvement, the complexity and individual nature of the learning process preclude the establishment of any single teaching method for composition. Teachers must constantly seek out the research reports that address the most effective methods of teaching the composing process. (HTH)

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Environment, Motivation, and the Composing Process

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In recent years our profession has paid incresing attention to the relationships between reading and writing in an attempt to improve the current methods of teaching composition. Since I have taught both developmental reading and developmental writing, I have followed this movement with interest. We are all aware, of course, of the valuable insights into the composing process which have been provided by those people who have been exploring the correlations between these two learning processes. I am concerned, however, that in the zeal to explore the similarities between reading and writing, the importance of the differences in the learning of these two skills is being ignored. Recognition of these differences, I believe, is equally important to the development of a more effective method of teaching writing.

The two areas in which these differences are most noticeable are environment and motivation. The importance of these areas to any learning process has been recognized and debated for years. But while we can trace concerns about the roles that motivation and environment play in the processes of reading and writing back through behaviorist and cognitive psychologists to John Dewey and Edmund Burke Huey, there is little research or information that relates to the differing roles that enviroment and motivation play in learning to read and write. Even the more recent discussions on the importance of these areas to the learning of basic language skills by such researchers as Frank and Yetta Goodman, Mina Shaughnessy, and Frank Smith are more concerned with establishing the importance of these areas to the learning process than with the exploration of the differing influences that they exert on the learning of reading and writing.

Before looking directly at these differing influences, however, we must first consider the relationship between environment and motivation. To do this, we must realize that the motivation to learn is (as Sara Lundsteen in Help for the Teacher of Written Composition, p. 2, and Gibson and Levin in The Psychology of Reading, p. 33, point out) an innate quality that may be stimulated but not generated by the teacher. The implication of this position is quite clear. In that motivation is a pre-existing quality that can only be fostered (and not implanted), environment must play the central role in the learning process. Support for this belief can be found in a

number of recent articles.

In a 1980 article, "The Good News About Becoming A Writer," Language Arts (Vol. 57, No. 7), Donna Wiseman and Dorothy Watson cite such sources as Kenneth Goodman, Carol Chomsky, and Frank Smith while explaining that children begin experimenting with written language as soon as they can grasp a pencil. The authors go on to show that this natural learning process is encouraged by exposure to print and becomes meangingful when children are encouraged to participate in the writing act (p.p. 753-754). In short, the natural desire to learn is stimulated by environment.

Elfrieda Hiebert's "Developmental Patterns and Interrelationships of Preschool Children's Print Awareness," Reading Research Quarterly (No. 2, 1981), is another representative article. Ms. Hiebert uses her article to show that preschoolers are more adept at major reading readiness skills (letter name knowledge, visual discrimination, and auditory discrimination) than had earlier been believed. Ms. Hiebert believes that this increased awarness is the result of environmental influences: "billboards, store fronts, street signs, television commercials, and containers of various kinds (p. 241)." Add to this the exposure to print through such programs as "Sesame Street" and "Electric Company" and we can begin to see the vast amount of print that is found in the environment of the preschooler. An awareness of this accumulation of print in the preschocler's environment is important; because as Ms. Hiebert points out, when the preschooler is exposed to print "in such settings where it is presented in a meaningful, contextualized way," the child has a greater recognition of written stimuli (p. 241). Again, environment is playing the central role in the learning process by stimulating the preschoolers' innate desire to make sense of the world around them.

Assuming, then, that environment (because of its ability to employ existing motivation) plays the pivotal role in learning to read and write, it must also be assumed that the greatest area of difference in the acquisition of these skills is environment. Motivation is, of course, important, but it must be remembered that motivation is a pre-existing force which relies on some form of stimulation to

put it to work. That stimulation may be as simple as the successful completion of a task. Or as Frank Smith explains in Comrehension and Learning, "achievement of a skill is adequate reinforcement for learning the skill (p. 231)." In reading and writing both, that reinforcement takes the form of feedback that indicates the level of success that has been achieved by the reader or writer in using a skill to reach a goal. In reading, the reinforcement is nearly instantaneous: the reader finds something out. This discovery motivates the reader to continue on, to make more discoveries through reading.

When children write, however, they quite often have trouble in receiving immediate feedback. This is especially true when children write in school, but it is also true in their preschool exposure to writing. This inadequate feedback generates an important difference in the acquisition of reading and writing skills. The inadequate writing feedback in the preschooler's environment results in the stimulation to read being greater than the stimulation to write. This difference in environmental stimulation is the result of the preschooler being exposed to a lot of product and very little process. With rare exception ("Sesame Street" and "Electric Company", for example), preschool children are seeing only the end result of writing: words and symbols. The children become very adept at recognizing company logos and brand names, but they often have little (if any) idea about how these symbols and words are created. While it is true, as previously noted, that children begin to experiment with written language almost from the moment that they can move a pencil on paper, a 1980 study by Wiseman and Watson shows that it isn't until they reach four or five years of age that children begin to understand the relationship between writing and letter production. To be sure, there may be physiological explanations for part of this, but environmental motivation must also play a role. Present research is too scarce and inadequate to make any definitive conclusions here but it is clearly an area that warrants further research.

Beyond the preschool age, lack of immediate feedback also provides motivational problems for developing writers in school. This is true both for the student's initial classroom contacts and for the student's contact with writing on through

the college level. The usual experience of the classroom writer is to write something, hand it in, and wait up to a week to discover how effective the writing act has been. The developing reader, on the other hand, knows from the moment the reading is over, usually, how successful the reading act has been. This manufactured distance between the developing writers and their compsitions has an adverse effect on motivation. And a reduced motivational drive has an adverse effect on the development of writing. Smith, Goodman, and Meredith, in Language and Thinking in School, explain that the lack of immediacy in feedback to the writer "may inhibit the learning of how to write (p. 293)." Barritt and Kroll, in Cooper and Odell's Research on Composing (p. 51), also see the lack of immediacy in feedback as a hindrance to the development of writing.

The implication of the preceding information is clear. Any program which hopes to help the developing writer to improve must establish an environment that will stimulate the developing writer's innate desire to learn. The key question, then, is what kind of an environment can accomplish this? According to Sara Lundsteen's Help for the Teacher of Written Composition, "the outstanding research conclusions of the last half century and the knowledge of the outstanding leaders in the teaching of language arts" indicate that such an environment should be varied enough to create "many kinds of creative response...(p.p. 1-2)." Such a varied environment would offer a wide range of stimuli for the different writers.

This concept of an ideal learning environment for the writer is supported and expanded by Sister M. Joan Lickteig in a 1981 Language Arts (No. 58) article, "Research Based Recommendations for Teachers of Writing." Sister Lickteig's environment is one that provides a warm and "supportive mileu [where] one can afford to take a risk, experiment with ideas and materials, and even make a mistake (p. 46)."

An ideal environment for the developing writer, then, is an environment which will provide stimulation not only to write but to speak, read, and listen as well. At the center of this, of course, is what will best stimulate the inner-motivation of the developing writer? In Language and Thinking in School, Smith, Goodman, and

Meredith explain that the failure of many students to learn to write effectively may be the the lack of an established need to write. The authors believe that such students see themselves as living in a "here and now world without a need for a language to communicate over time and place (p. 239)." If this is true, and I believe it is, the first step in creating a productive environment for the developing writer is to establish a need for written communication. But it must be a realistic need, one that goes beyond the walls of the classroom.

Given the present state of the job market and our projected leap into the computer age, establishing realistic needs for a mastery of all language skills should be easy. Guest lecturers from local businesses and industries can be useful in showing the student the importance of all the communication skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) to success at any level of management. Computer professionals can also be helpful in showing the student that computers need to be programmed and serviced by people who are capable of communicating (between themselves and the computers) in a very precise language.

Beyond establishing a need for written communication, the developing writer's environment must also provide the possibility of success. Both Mina Shaughnessy (Errors and Expectations, p.p. 126-128) and Frank Smith (Writing and the Writer, p. 175) have explained that unless developing writers feel that there is a chance for success through writing, they are unwilling to commit themeselves to the time and energy needed to successfully complete the writing act. Establishing realistic goals, then, is a very important part of creating an effective environment for the developing writer. These goals will, of course, be individual, and they must come as a result of a consultation between the student and the teacher. the student will probably begin the course with the established goal of passing the course. A consultation with the teacher during the third week of the semester may, however, help the student to realize that a reduction of errors or the elimination of a major problem area would be a more realistic goal. By helping the student to set realistic (attainable) goals, success can be built into a course, and that success can fuel a desire to continue working.

Creating an environment that provides immediate feedback to the developing writer can also help to fuel that writer's inner-motivation. This feedback can be provided by the instructor, peers, or the individual student.

The instructor can provide immediate feedback through in-class conferencing. To do this effectively, the teacher must set a three to five minute deadline for coferencing with each student. Even with this deadline, however, it may be difficult to see each student during a single class period. Therefore, in-class conferencing should be an ongoing process which will allow the teacher to provide some immediate feedback to each student at least once a week. There will, of course, be some students who will need more than three to five minutes of personal attention. These students can receive additional time and attention during class periods not designated for conferencing.

Students can provide immediate feedback for one another through group work and collaborative writing assignments. Collaborative writing involves two students in producing one writing assignment. Unless the teacher is needed as a writing partner, collaborative writing can also provide a good opportunity for conferencing.

Extensive work and direction on the editing and revising stage of the writing process can help the individual student to develop the skills needed to provide his or her own immediate feedback to the writing act.

While environment does play a pivotal role in writing improvement, it must be remembered that the complexity of the learning process and individual nature itself preclude the establishment of any single method of teaching composition. It is important that we remember this; for if we are to improve as teachers and advance our profession, we must constantly seek out the research and reports which are concerned with the most effective methodology of teaching the composing process.

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